Overview

Because of its setting and rich history, the Central Waterfront is perhaps Seattle's most dramatic location. It is the site of an ancient Native American settlement and the city's birthplace. Even in the course of Seattle's brief history, parts of the area have been rebuilt several times. With its current collection of piers, pier sheds and old warehouse structures, the area possesses a distinctive urban form and development pattern reflecting past functions. The arrival and departure of ferries, the presence of trains and trolleys, and the steady stream of traffic on the viaduct lends the area a kinetic character. The area is proximate to downtown, yet feels removed. It is a place of transitions—the transition between water and land, the natural and built environment, the open quiet of the bay and the bustle and congestion of the city, the more modest, fine-grained development from a century ago and the modern skyscraper city.

The identity of the area is shaped by these qualities, along with other physical characteristics, including the topography, the design and massing of buildings, the network of streets, the views in and out of the area, and the patterns of activity that occur here. Recognizing what defines the existing character of the Central Waterfront helps determine what essential qualities need to be retained or enhanced, and how the area can be artfully adapted to meet Seattle's future needs.

Historic Development

The Evolving Waterfront

The shape and character of Seattle's Central Waterfront evolved in response to the demands of the many different functions occurring there over time. Since Seattle's founding in 1852, the area has undergone dramatic physical changes as well as evolutions in its principal uses, as illustrated by Figure 1. The process of change continues today. Understanding how changing functions have shaped the waterfront provides a better understanding of the existing environment, and offers insight into how the area might change in the future.

1852 – 1880: Pioneer City

Between 1852 and 1880, Seattle's waterfront was transformed from a stretch of wilderness to a bustling industrial and transportation hub. The earliest known inhabitants of the area, the Duwamish Indians, established a winter village, known as Djidjiila'letch, at a bend in the shoreline near the present intersection of 1st Avenue and Yesler Way. The name Djidjiila'letch meant "little crossing over place." In 1852, Seattle's founders chose this shoreline location for the city because it was better suited as a protected deep water harbor than the original landing site at Alki Beach. The location proved ideal for Seattle's early development as a lumber mill town; the waterfront provided

easy access to timber, which could be cut and skidded down the adjacent hillsides for processing and shipping at the shoreline.

During Seattle's early development, the waterfront served as both the port and the city's manufacturing and industrial heart. In 1853, the territory's first steam sawmill, Yesler's Mill, began operation near the present intersection of 1st Avenue and Yesler Way. Soon afterwards, Yesler's Wharf was built out into Elliott Bay, providing the initial base for Seattle's lumber, coal and flour industries and marine commerce and transportation. The long process of reshaping the natural shoreline began as waste from the mill, ballast from ships, and earth from numerous regrade projects pushed the shoreline westward from an original alignment that roughly followed what is now Post Alley and 1st Avenue. Native Americans encamped at the newly filled areas of Ballast Island, a raised mound at the foot of Washington Street formed from material dumped off ships anchored nearby, and Ba'qbaqwab, located at the foot of Bell Street.

By the 1870's, railroads linked the waterfront to the region's coal mines, delivering fuel for ocean going steamships. The "mosquito fleet," a flotilla of private steamers and wooden vessels, plied the harbor, carrying passengers, mail and produce from outlying communities, and helped establish Seattle as the regional center of waterborne transportation.

The early harbor developed as a haphazard collection of irregularly shaped and crudely constructed wooden piers, piersheds, and trestles. The principal docks were located between Jackson Street and Yesler Way. Stretching northward along the shoreline were additional piers, warehouses, saw mills and coal bunkers. The mix of activities included shipbuilding on the beach between Bell and Blanchard Streets, bathing beaches near Pike Street, and, at the far north end in distant Belltown, a barrel factory on the site of the Olympic Sculpture Park.

1880 – 1900: Waterfront Boom

Tremendous growth at the turn of the 19th century helped Seattle shed its past as a backwater pioneer mill town to become an international commercial and trading center. Nowhere in the city was this transformation more apparent than along the waterfront—the City's gateway to the outside world. To accommodate the railroads linking the city to the transcontinental network, the current shoreline edge was created, and most of the existing pier structures were built during this period.

Construction of Railroad Avenue (now Alaskan Way) in 1885 for use by the major rail lines connecting the port to the transcontinental rail network resulted in a major reconfiguration of the waterfront. Extending outside the high tide line, the entire 120 foot wide right-of-way was built on pilings over water, with the railroad tracks supported on wood trestles. Pier structures, also supported on pilings, were connected to land by the railroad trestles and wooden walkways, with the gap between gradually filled to establish the current shoreline edge.

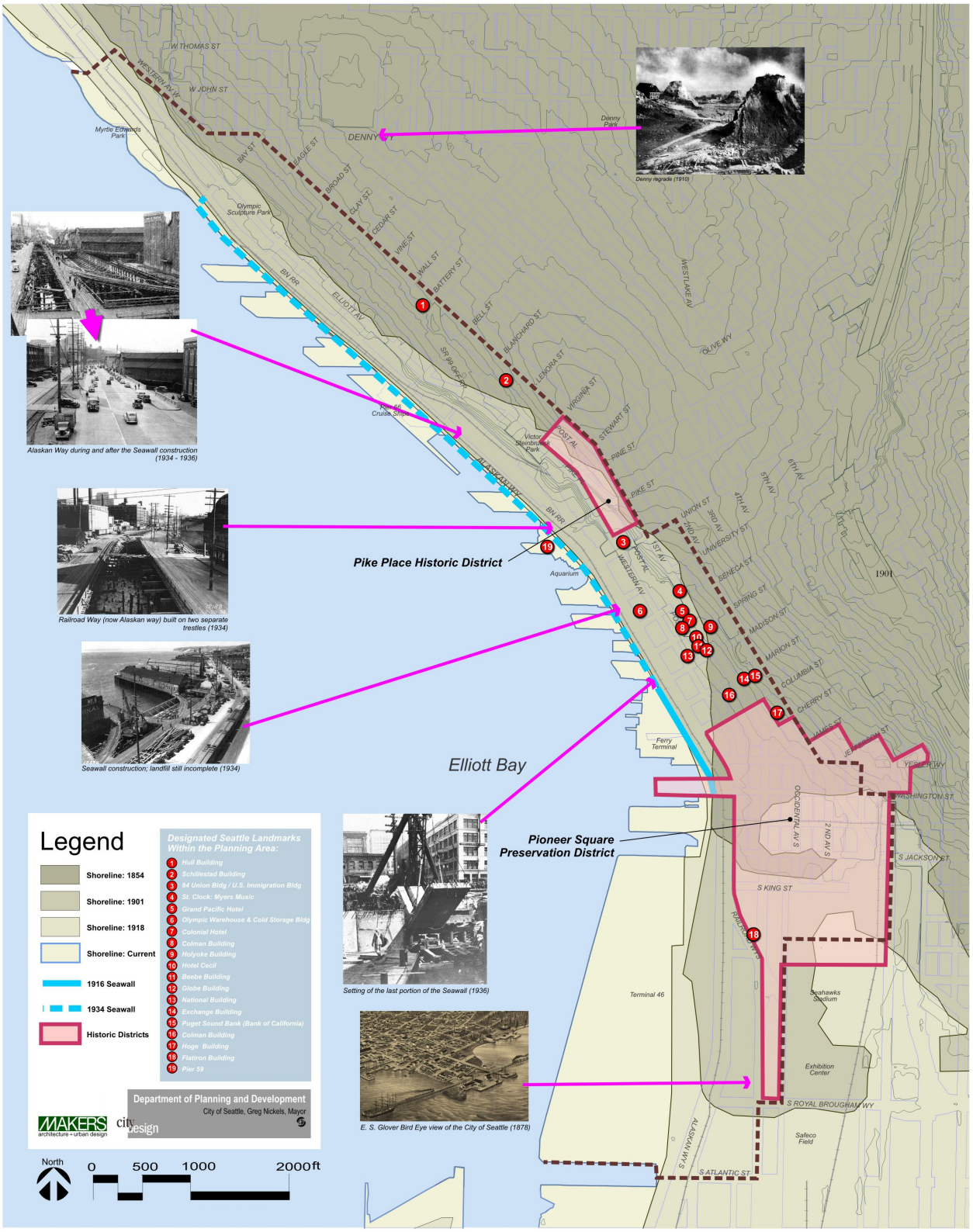

Figure 1. Historic Elements on the Waterfront

In 1889, Seattle's Great Fire destroyed most of the downtown commercial district, including the waterfront. The fire occurred at a time of great economic vitality, and the harbor facilities were quickly rebuilt in the same haphazard fashion as before, although enlarged to accommodate four times their previous capacity. Colman Dock (Pier 52) became the home to the Mosquito Fleet, and developed into a major landmark and water transportation center, distinguished by its domed waiting room and famous clock tower.

By 1895, the three transcontinental railroads serving Seattle had acquired most of the waterfront piers. Each railroad operated its own facilities, and the competition between them resulted in the inefficient duplication of infrastructure—tracks, yards, depots and stations—creating chaotic conditions along Railway Avenue and further isolating the waterfront from the rest of the city.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the harbor facilities showed signs of obsolescence. The wooden finger piers built after the fire again lacked capacity to handle increasing volumes of trade and were unable to accommodate the larger steamships now calling on Seattle. The discovery of gold in Alaska in 1897 and the ensuing Klondike gold rush was the catalyst for a dramatic transformation of the waterfront into a major international deep-water port accommodating major steamship lines for the Alaskan trade.

During this period, the pier structures were realigned to promote more orderly harbor operations. While longer piers were needed to accommodate larger ships, the depth of Elliott Bay made extending piers straight off the shoreline too costly. Extending them at an angle increased the available frontage for longer ships, while allowing the pier structures to remain within shallower water. The angled piers also accommodated the radius requirements of the rail spurs needed to connect them to the main rail lines along Railroad Avenue. In addition to the expansion and reconfiguration of the piers along the shoreline, areas immediately inland were developed to accommodate the warehouses, wholesalers, and other activities requiring rail access or needed to support the growing waterfront.

The Klondike Gold Rush also fueled Seattle's shipbuilding industry. The Moran Brothers Company, later named the Seattle Construction and Dry Dock Company, began operation of a marine repair shop and shipyard on tidelands at the foot of South Charles Street, on what is now part of the Terminal 46 complex. The firm flourished during the Gold Rush boom, expanding onto several piers and undertaking major Navy contracts for steel-hulled vessels.

With the Gold Rush, Seattle became the established Gateway to Alaska. The resulting economic growth and development enhanced the city's trading position as a leading port of entry for goods from the Orient as well, with silk being one of the major and most valuable imports passing through Seattle up until the 1930s. During this period, and the years immediately following, most of Seattle's surviving wooden wharves were built.

Also built during this period, but since destroyed, were the landmark Colman Dock and the Grand Trunk Terminal, with their elaborate domes and clock towers.

1900 – 1930: Maturing Waterfront

With major public improvements spurring continued growth and development, the commercial and trade function of the Central Waterfront peaked during the first two decades of the 20th century, while port facilities also expanded north to Interbay and south to Harbor Island.

The re-routing of rail passenger traffic through a tunnel constructed in 1905 underneath the downtown business district helped relieve waterfront rail congestion. The tunnel also led to the construction of new passenger terminals at King Street, replacing the original terminal that had operated on the waterfront at the foot of Columbia Street. However, since access to the tunnel was not available to all railway companies, the waterfront corridor remained congested. The combination of heavy rail traffic, and the warehousing and manufacturing activity attracted to the area because of available rail access, further isolated the waterfront from the rest of the city.

The shoreline became more permanently fixed with the construction of the sea wall. Built in two phases, the first phase from Washington Street to Madison Street was constructed between 1909 and 1917. The Railroad Avenue area behind the wall was filled in with earth from the regarding of Jackson Street through the International District.

In 1911, voters approved the creation of a Port Commission to oversee orderly development and management of the County's harbors and waterways—partly to counter the railroads' control of the waterfront and address the chaotic conditions existing there. Under a comprehensive general plan for improvements, the Commission purchased piers to develop a public port to ensure that small shippers would have access to wharfage and warehouse space, which the railroads otherwise controlled. Other Port improvements included the construction of the Bell Street Terminal (Pier 66), completed in 1913, and the purchase and operation of a West Seattle Ferry at the foot of Marion Street.

Under the Port Commission's direction, much of the flood plain of the Duwamish River beyond the Central Waterfront was filled with earth from the city's regarded areas, and the east and west waterways were dredged to provide water access to shipping facilities and industrial sites to the south. In 1916, similar improvements were made further north to expand harbor facilities at Interbay's Smith Cove.

In 1915, Seattle's first waterfront park was developed by the Port of Seattle on the roof of the Bell Street Terminal, and included a solarium, salt water pool, and children's play area. The park was closed in the 1920's because of its reputation for attracting undesirable characters. New structures were also built along the waterfront during this period, including the Canadian Pacific freight and passenger terminal at Pier 64 and, in the 1930's, the reinforced concrete terminal for the American Can Company at Pier 69.

1930 – 1970: Decline and Transition

The importance of the Central Waterfront diminished with the decline of passenger carriers and the use of larger cargo ships that could no longer be accommodated there. By the end of the 1920s, a variety of factors—labor troubles, world economics, maritime legislation, changing technology, control of property, the increasing intensity of development in adjacent areas, and severe topography—contributed to the decline and shift of maritime activity away from the Central Waterfront.

The golden age of the Mosquito Fleet was over; by the 1930's, private automobile ferries had replaced nearly all the steamboats of the fleet, requiring a complete reconstruction of Colman Dock to handle auto and truck traffic. The old landmark terminal with its clock tower was demolished and replaced in 1937. The replacement was similar to today's terminal, although smaller. With only a single-lane entry that was too small to accommodate big trucks, this facility quickly became obsolete. Ultimately, the Washington State Ferries acquired the ferry system in 1951, followed by the purchase of Colman Dock in 1952. In 1966 the current terminal was completed. Although dramatically different in its operations, the existing ferry system represents one of the few activities remaining at essentially the same location throughout most of the waterfront's history.

Passage of the Maritime Act in 1936 imposed more rigid standards for passenger vessels. Several passenger lines calling at the Central Waterfront ceased operation because they were unwilling or unable to meet the new standards.

The final stage of the seawall construction was completed in 1936, extending the seawall north to Broad Street. The project not only included the building o f the seawall, but also the conversion of Railroad Avenue from a series of piling-structured trestles to a filled concrete paved street now known as Alaskan Way. The right-of-way improvements allowed for safer and more convenient vehicular and pedestrian movement, wider sidewalks, and the relocation of power poles and remaining railroad tracks to the eastern half of the right-of-way.

By the 1930's, increasing automobile use prompted the study of proposals to reduce congestion and improve access to downtown by shifting north/south through traffic from 4th Avenue to an elevated, six lane, "monumental" boulevard along the waterfront. This proposal later materialized as the Alaskan Way Viaduct. The first link of Viaduct opened in 1953, followed by the connection to Aurora Avenue through the Battery Street tunnel in 1954. Originally conceived as a through-route, no ramp connections were built to downtown. However, ramps were later added in the 1960's. While regarded as a successful achievement in its day, the two-tiered structure further blighted the waterfront area and reinforced the barrier to public access initially created by the railroads.

As shifts occurred in technology and transportation, and as containerization eclipsed break-bulk cargo handling in the 1950s, the downtown waterfront lost its identity as a place of work and industry. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the future of port operations on the central waterfront was uncertain. Passenger travel by ferry remained active, but cargo handling activity began shifting to the south, and fishing activity relocated to the north. Waterborne freight terminals and fish processing facilities continued to occupy some piers, while "back-up" space occupied by warehouses and wholesale facilities serving these activities remained in some upland areas.

The continued decline of maritime trade and commerce on the Central Waterfront also resulted in a shift of long held values about the area's role in the city. Quality of life and community identity increasingly were seen to be equally as important as manufacturing and industrial development to the economic health and attraction of the region. As this perspective gained ground, views of the waterfront as an amenity and recreational resource began to develop an increasingly significant constituency within the city.

This change in perspective on the waterfront's role may have been reinforced by the 1962 Seattle Worlds Fair. During the Fair, a number of ships moored at waterfront piers temporarily served as floating hotels and restaurants for fair visitors. Also, the Edgewater Inn occupied a vacant pier to provide accommodations. With the declining state of the waterfront coinciding with a new vision for Seattle fostered by the World's Fair, the prospect of a tourist commercial waterfront began to take hold. Subsequent plans explored this new orientation for the area. The 1963 Comprehensive Plan for the Central Business District and the 1965 John Graham Waterfront Plan identified objectives for Central Waterfront redevelopment, including the desire to establish for Seattle's citizens a strong orientation to the waterfront. Developing public open space combined with commercial activities was identified as key to revitalizing the declining and underutilized waterfront.

Several design studies following these plans, including the 1973 "Rockrise Report" and the 1978 "Alaskan Way Seawall and Promenade Guide Plan." Among the proposals for the Central Waterfront was a 19 acre planned redevelopment encompassing ten piers from the Colman Ferry Dock to Pier 66, to be implemented collaboratively by private owners, the City, and Port Authority. To realize the waterfront's potential as a public amenity and major tourist attraction, staged improvements would include a floating breakwater and small boat marina, motels, restaurants, shops, a new passenger steamship terminal for the Canadian Pacific Railway, an expanded commuter ferry terminal, historic seaport, a heliport, and an aquarium—all linked by a pedestrian promenade. A moving sidewalk on an elevated overpass would strengthen the link with the Pike Place Market, and a waterfront site was to be made available for a world trade center symbolizing the city's role as "Gateway to the Orient."

1970 – 1990: Public Investment and Redevelopment

By the 1970's, the widespread introduction of containerization had shifted most port activity to the mouth of the Duwamish River, where the Port was developing facilities specifically designed for container handling. Except for Terminal 46 at the far south end, the Central Waterfront lacked sufficient usable upland area to support modern marine container terminals.

While throughout its history, the waterfront supported diverse industries, by the 1970's, industrial activity also dwindled, with fish processing the primary holdout. Changes in the fishing industry, with much of the processing occurring offshore aboard ship or at other locations, however, continued to diminish the demand for waterfront space. Shipbuilding, on the decline since the close of World War II, enjoyed a resurgence in the 1970s, but the activity had shifted to the Todd and Lockheed yards on Harbor Island. With the Port's development of container cargo facilities on Terminal 46, the last trace of this industry also vanished from the Central Waterfront.

As port activity withdrew, several old piers and pier sheds were torn down and the areas they once occupied turned into parking lots or left as open water. Piers 60 and 61, built between the World Wars, were demolished in the 1970's, while Piers 56, 57, and 70 were privately redeveloped for tourist-oriented retail, restaurant and entertainment uses. Other piers were used for fish processing, cheap warehousing space, or remained vacant. The once active waterfront became underutilized, with pier structures remaining as remnants of the past.

Amidst this decline in trade and industrial activity, several proposals for public improvements that were rooted in plans from the 1960's began to materialize. In 1974, Waterfront Park was developed between Piers 57 and 59, and in 1977 Piers 59 and 60 were redeveloped to house the Aquarium. In 1976, the City also developed Myrtle Edwards Park at the northern end of the Central Waterfront to create a linear park along Elliott Bay linking with Elliott Bay Park, 14 acres of additional shoreline open space owned by the Port. The Pike Street Hillclimb was built in 1977 to better link the waterfront with the Pike Place Market. Later, in 1982, the waterfront street car began operating along Alaskan Way, linking tourist attractions and public amenities between Myrtle Edwards Park and Pioneer Square.

Adjacent inland areas were also in transition. In 1982, Cornerstone Development renovated and constructed several buildings to accommodate a mix of uses, including housing, on six blocks bounded by 1st Avenue, Alaskan Way, Madison, and Seneca Streets. This project helped trigger the rehabilitation of the surrounding area, accelerating the shift from a warehouse/industrial district to a mixed use/commercial area.

In the 1980's, Seattle again reexamined the future of the waterfront in the context of a major planning effort for the entire downtown area. The Downtown Land Use and Transportation Plan adopted in 1985 included regulatory changes and programmatic actions to guide future waterfront development. To further implement the Downtown

Plan's proposals, a Harborfront Public Improvement Plan was prepared in 1987 for the 1.5 mile area along Alaskan Way between Pier 48 and Myrtle Edwards Park.

The 1985 Downtown Plan resulted in zoning changes for areas adjacent to the waterfront, promoting high density residential development along the Belltown edge where canneries, warehouses, and an oil fueling depot had once served waterfront uses, and allowing a broader mix of uses at higher densities in other upland locations. In general, the new zoning allowed a variety of uses, but limited the intensity of development to maintain a transition between the waterfront and downtown's more intensively developed inland areas.

In the late 1980's, a County open space bond issue to fund proposed Harborfront Plan improvements, including a widened pedestrian promenade, recreational moorage, expansion of the Aquarium, and redesign of Waterfront Park, failed at the polls. Despite this setback, the City continued to pursue achieving some of the key public improvements. North/south pedestrian connections were improved on the east side of Alaskan Way north of Pike Street. To improve public access to the waterfront and increase public open space in the area, the City acquired Piers 62 and 63 through a trade for Pier 57 to the south, with the City retaining public access around the Pier 57 apron. The trade allowed for the strengthening of the waterfront's "retail core" from Pier 57 to the south, while concentrating public ownership to the north. At the time, Piers 62 and 63 were viewed as a potential expansion site for the Aquarium, and another point of public access along the shoreline. In 1989, the City demolished the dilapidated pier sheds to accommodate public open space now used for summer concerts.

1990 – Present: New Opportunities

In recent years, the incremental implementation of public improvements outlined in the 1987 Harborfront Improvement Plan has continued—mostly in the northern end of the waterfront. The Port of Seattle has been another major player in carrying out the vision of the 1987 Plan. In the mid 1990's, the Port developed a cruise ship terminal, conference center, maritime museum, and public moorage at their former offices at Pier 66. Now in its second year of operation, the Pier 66 terminal is homeport to two cruise ships, with one more to be added by 2004. The former America Can Company freight terminal at Pier 69 has also been converted to serve as the new headquarters and administrative offices of the Port.

The disposition of some of the Port of Seattle's central waterfront properties in the 1990s also dramatically transformed the waterfront environment in the upland area between Pike and Bell Streets. Previously occupied by back-up warehouse space for waterfront freight handlers and fish processing activity, recent improvements on these properties include private development of office space (World Trade Center), a 358 room Marriott Hotel, and 234 units of housing in the Waterfront Upland project.

The development of Port properties resulted in several open space and public access improvements, including public open space at the Bell Street Pier and Bell Harbor

Conference Center, a mechanical hillclimb at Lenora Street and a pedestrian bridge at Bell Street to improve pedestrian access between the north waterfront and the Belltown and Pike Place Market, a bicycle and pedestrian trail on the east side of Alaskan Way, and expanded recreational moorage south of the Conference Center.

In 1999, the Seattle Art Museum and Trust for Public Lands purchased the abandoned 7.4 acre Union Oil (Unocal) Terminal site in Belltown north of Broad Street to develop a major public sculpture park with access to the shoreline.

Another recent transformation in upland areas has been the development of a substantial amount of housing. There are now concentrations of housing along the western edges of Belltown to the north and between the Pike Place Market and Pioneer Square in the Commercial Core to the south, where Harbor Steps, built in phases in the 1990s, has substantially increased the residential population in the area.

Furthermore, the growth of the high-technology sector in Seattle has created demand for non-conventional office sites with urban amenities. Several waterfront area buildings and properties have been recently converted to accommodate such high-tech uses on pier structures and in old warehouse buildings and other structures in upland areas.

Next Stage of Evolution

The Central Waterfront planning area continues to support activities at various stages of evolution; waterborne passenger transportation activities – ferries, tour boats, comercial moorage, cruise ship operations – remain strong, while cargo handling, fish processing and shipbuilding, once viable industries here, have moved on to other areas. Commercial, entertainment, tourist and recreational uses have a growing presence. New activities, like high tech businesses, have made an initial appearance, along with housing—now a more predominant use in some upland areas. Some uses in the area could only exist here and nowhere else, while others are more adaptable, and are drawn here because of special opportunities or amenities that favor a waterfront location.

Recent developments like the Aquarium, Sculpture Park, and other public open spaces suggest that public uses will have an increasing influence on the future function and character of the area. Perhaps the most significant factor influencing the Central Waterfront's future was the Nisqually earthquake of 2001 and the resulting damage that will require replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct and sea wall. Just as the railroads, and later the viaduct, reshaped and redirected the function of the Central Waterfront earlier, rebuilding the viaduct and seawall creates the potential for a new direction in this century. The waterfront's historic isolation from the rest of downtown could change with the viaduct's reconstruction and the resulting shifts in the types of activities that may be drawn to the area. As pressure increases to absorb the Central Waterfront area into the larger pattern of downtown activity, the value of the area as a unique place with its own role and character needs to be given careful consideration.